

Big-city mayors join to lobby state

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Mayors from Ohio's largest cities gathered at Cleveland City Hall on Monday for a show of strength, urging state lawmakers not to cut a fund that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to municipalities.

The mayors predicted that cuts to the Local Government Fund - which spreads \$700 million to counties, cities and villages across Ohio and another \$400 million to libraries - would lead to job cuts for police and firefighters.

"You can't have homeland security without hometown security," Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman said.

Coleman spent the day meeting with Mayor Jane Campbell and the mayors of Cincinnati, Dayton, Akron and Toledo. The goal was to form a unified set of priorities.

Their top priority is keeping the Local Government Fund off the chopping block. With a hefty deficit expected in the state budget, the mayors fear the fund will be trimmed.

Other priorities include continuing to push for reforms in the way schools are funded and attracting more state and federal dollars to create jobs.

The Local Government Fund was slashed by \$30 million last year, resulting in a \$4 million cut to Cleveland. The city still received about \$55 million last year, with Columbus receiving about \$50 million and Akron getting about \$17 million.

The mayors said another round of cuts would force them to lay off workers.

"There's just no more fat to trim," said Akron Mayor Don Plusquellic.

All six of the mayors who met are Democrats. They plan to lobby lawmakers, but with the Statehouse controlled by Republicans who represent suburbs and rural areas, it's unclear if they will have much impact.

Still, the big-city mayors are not alone in worrying about the fate of the Local Government Fund. Suburbs, particularly older suburbs, also would suffer if the fund is cut.

East Cleveland, for example, counted on the fund for almost a fourth of its operating income in 2003, according to a survey compiled by County Commissioner Peter Lawson Jones. More than 20 other suburbs reported levels ranging from 5 percent to 12 percent.

"A lot of us stand to lose a lot of money," said Keith Schuster, finance director in Maple Heights, which faces a \$2 million deficit next year and where 10 percent of the operating income in 2003 came from the Local Government Fund. "It would devastate us."

Plain Dealer reporter Thomas Ott contributed to this story.